

INTRODUCTION

After trading online for a few months, you will probably have amassed a huge list of customer email addresses. How can you use these to stimulate new sales? You need to be careful to stay within the law. Equally, you won't want to annoy your old clients with irrelevant email.

In this month's *Business Help*, we'll show you how to put together a successful and legal marketing email that will attract clients and avoid anti-spam systems.

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Email marketing

If you're looking for ways to entice new customers, why not approach your old ones? Simon Edwards explains how to use email to stimulate new business in a fair and friendly fashion

Q We have a small mail order company that sells T-shirts. We've been trading for two years and are making enough money to be profitable. We're ready to grow and want to increase our sales, but don't have enough cash to fund a large marketing campaign. Hopefully, people who have already bought our T-shirts liked the designs, so maybe they would be interested in buying new ones.

Our website is quite popular, getting lots of hits every day, but if we could get our old customers to visit and see the new designs, we think we could improve sales. Can we legally use the email addresses of old customers to send them advertising? We don't want to get into trouble or annoy anyone.

Stevie Decke



A Email is a cheap and convenient way to drum up new business. You don't face the printing costs of a direct mailing campaign, and you can virtually guarantee that your message reaches the right people in minutes or seconds rather than days.

However, sending out masses of email messages carries some risks. There is legislation designed to stop businesses from simply dumping junk email into everyone's inbox. Just as importantly from a business point of view, people appear to react less favourably to junk email than to the rubbish that piles through their letter boxes. If you can send out useful email to people who want it, you've found the Holy Grail of email marketing. We'll show you how to start your quest.

THE BASICS

People like and expect consistency when they get messages from companies. When you send out email messages, use the same layout for each and use graphics such as the company logo to make it clear that this is an official message from a brand that the recipient recognises; it's the email equivalent of headed stationery. Even if punters don't care about the product on offer, as long as they are not irritated by the email, good design reinforces your brand in a positive way.

HTML VERSUS TEXT

Emails can be written in two different formats: HTML and plain text. Not every email program reads HTML, and many that can are set up to ignore images for security reasons. For a list of email clients, and details on how they handle images by default, visit www.emailtools.co.uk/tips/email-image-blocking.htm. Popular programs such as AOL, Hotmail, Outlook 2003 and the most recent version of Outlook Express hide images until the user clicks to view them. Many also block external images for privacy reasons. External images are not stored inside the email message, but are loaded from a website when recipients open the email.

HTML is great because you can embed logos and pictures of products and use colourful text. However, as stated above, not every program can display HTML, so you should also provide a plain text alternative. If you don't, the message may look garbled and may be flagged as spam by anti-spam programs.

To test how your email will come through, sign up for the most popular types of email account, such as

Hotmail, Gmail and Yahoo!. Install the main types of email client, including recent versions of Outlook, Outlook Express and Thunderbird. Send template HTML email messages to these accounts and see how they look in each program. Do any fail to appear, even in plain text? Are any caught by the anti-spam filters? If so, see 'Spam concerns' (opposite).

WHICH EMAIL PROGRAM?

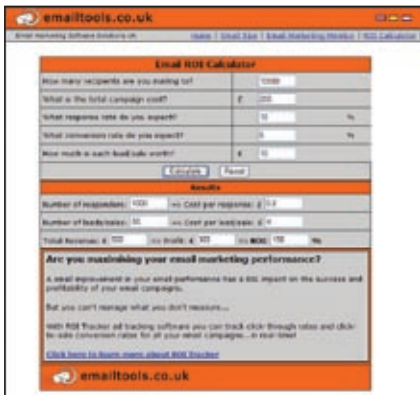
Don't send marketing email using Outlook or Outlook Express. Neither of these programs creates HTML messages that translate well into plain text. To send professional-looking email, you need software that can create messages in the Multipart-Alternative MIME format. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any popular desktop email programs that can do this, although Thunderbird appears to do a half-decent job. A better alternative is to use an online service such as www.mailchimp.com. This can combine HTML and text to create a Multipart-Alternative MIME email. It can also track who clicks through to your website from the email, as well as handling mailmerge features to let you personalise your messages. For around £30, you can send 2,000 email messages.

More advanced software such as Lyrus ListManager (www.lyris.co.uk) lets you do all manner of clever and powerful things, including testing subsets of messages, tracking responses, performing demographic analysis and adding audio and video to your mailings. These features are not cheap, however – the cost of this service starts at around £400.

PERSONAL TOUCH

Personalising email is important. At the very least, the message should be addressed directly to the recipient. This means putting their email address in the To: field and using their name in the body of the email. One advantage with using a mailmerge email is that you can put individually crafted web links in the message. When a recipient clicks a link to visit your site, you'll know their exact identity. Tracking who clicks what lets you concentrate on people who appear genuinely interested in your products or services.

The worst thing you can do is fill the CC: field of an email with every address on your list. Not only does this make it obvious to the recipients that they are just one of a thousand people you are approaching, but they



▲ Worried your email server has been blacklisted? Test your IP address at emailtools.co.uk to find out

can see everyone else's email address. More importantly to them, a thousand other people can see theirs. This is a gross breach of privacy and will annoy at best. You may also end up in legal trouble as the Data Protection Act 1998 states that companies processing personal data should keep it reasonably secure.

IMAGE CONSCIOUS

Due to the various ways email programs work, it is considered good practice to avoid embedding images into HTML email messages. Instead, consider hosting them on your own website and putting a link to them in the email message. Such a link would look something like this:

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If you do embed images, make sure they are not big files. People don't want to download large, potentially useless attachments.

ADVANCED TECHNIQUES

To decide when to send out your marketing email messages, consider your customers. Are they nine-to-five office workers? When will they check their email? When will they be least busy and most likely to read your message? If your business involves sending out horse-racing tips, don't wait until the last few minutes before the races. Get the messages out at least 24 hours earlier, and make sure they'll arrive before your

readers leave the office early on a Friday. Sending messages out on a Friday morning might provide a welcome distraction during a Friday lunch hour, but maybe Thursday would be better (more people go out on a Friday lunchtime). Alternatively, send mail late on Sunday night so that it's the top item in the recipient's inbox on Monday morning.

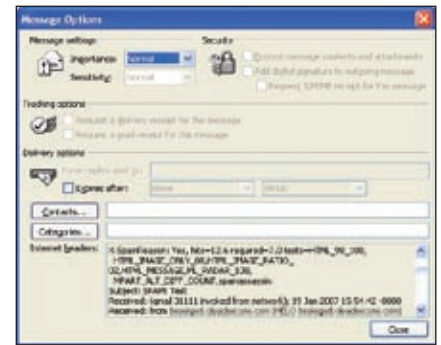
There is plenty of research available that discusses the pros and cons of different days and times. In practice, everyone is different and your customers may behave counter to the research you've read. For this reason, always monitor the response you get over a period of time. By experimenting, you may be able to find a sweet spot during which you get the highest number of responses. Visit www.emallabs.com/resources/resources_statistics.html for some example statistics. They are out of date, because the company wants to sell you the latest data, but they give you an idea of what the professionals are monitoring. Copy their techniques.

SENDING NEEDS

When you send out marketing email, you should send it from an address at your own domain. Use a sensible address such as sales@domain.com rather than jill1324@somewhere-offers.com. Anti-spam software doesn't like usernames with numeric characters in them, and hates domains with 'offers' anywhere after the @ sign.

Check the system time on the computer that's sending out the email. If it is wrong, it makes anti-spam software suspicious. Don't send email from your own mail server that is connected to the internet via a dial-up account. Many anti-spam programs subscribe to spam blacklists, which are often set up to block email that is sent directly from servers using dial-up internet addresses. Similarly, avoid using your ISP's mail server. Not only will this be slower than your own, but it is also vulnerable to being blacklisted because spammers sometimes try to use them.

If you use your own email server and suspect that your IP address has been blacklisted, you can check. Use the form at www.emailtools.co.uk/tools/blacklistcheck.htm and enter your IP address into each field in turn. If you find you have been blacklisted, don't panic. It may be a mistake, or it may be



▲ Your message's internet headers may give clues as to why your email has been classed as spam

someone else's fault. Follow the instructions for the blacklist in question and avoid being aggressive with your enquiries.

SPAM CONCERNS

When you send yourself test messages, as we have recommended (see 'HTML versus text' (opposite)), you'll be able to see how various email services and clients classify your message regarding its similarity to spam. Although you can use trial and error to avoid being detected, this could become a long and painful process. It's better to set up anti-spam software and analyse the results of the scans. For example, a basic setup could involve installing the free SpamPal software and using that to tell you how similar to spam your messages are.

SpamPal and other reasonably advanced anti-spam programs can attach reports to suspect messages, highlighting why they think they are spam. In the screenshot above, the email headers in our message contain details of why our anti-spam software thought it was spam. The message needed to score less than seven points to get past the filter, but it scored 12. This is because it was written solely in HTML (without an alternative text version attached) and was mainly an image with very little accompanying text. We know this is why it was classed as spam because of the lines that read:

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HTML_IMAGE_ONLY_08, HTML_IMAGE_RATIO_02, HTML_MESSAGE, MPART_ALT_DIFF_COUNT.
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These are rules for the SpamAssassin anti-spam software that many mail servers use. If you want to be able to understand them, you can find a list at http://spamassassin.apache.org/tests_3_1_x.html. It looks technical, but reading the descriptions of the rules can give you great tips on how to stop your mail looking like spam. Here are some quick tips based on SpamAssassin rules:

- Don't use lots of capitalisation
- Keep your HTML code simple and accurate
- Don't start an email with 'Dear Friend'
- If you run a home refinancing business, consider describing this service using different words
- 'Free Preview' wins extra spam points (in a bad way). ☹

Next month

IMPROVE YOUR WEBSITE

Make your business' website more effective and easier to use

Legal brief The law and common sense

Even if your marketing email is discreet, personalised and to the point, it can still be illegal. In the UK, there are two central pieces of relevant legislation. These are the EU Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications and the Data Protection Act 1998. While we certainly wouldn't discourage you from investigating these dry documents, you can virtually guarantee that you will comply if you behave reasonably. It's also worth saying that even if you follow the letter of the law, you could still annoy your customers. There are ways to act responsibly, legally and in a way that will attract rather than repel customers.

For example, while you shouldn't send marketing email to people with whom you have had no previous dealings, it is perfectly legal to send a mass email of adverts out to

previous customers who have bought similar products. Will they love you for it? It's doubtful. It would be better to contact them with a polite request to opt in to your marketing scheme, which you should call something more enticing, like a newsletter or special offer hotline. If users opt in, you know you are not wasting your time or theirs. You should continue to offer opt-out options with every email you send. In fact, when you first collect their email addresses, it's a good idea to provide an opt-out tickbox or similar.

If you want to send offers to people who are not customers, you need to persuade them to opt in. They have to approach you first, so get in the habit of asking permission on your website, over the phone (when they call you, not the other way around) and in any other interaction that they initiate.